

The Camarillo Sisterhood
Stories of Women Who Made a Difference at the Camarillo Ranch



Each week our research team will present a story for your enjoyment.

This week : Isabel Menchaca Camarillo

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April 24, 2020

Isabel Menchaca Camarillo (1861-1936)
Wife of Adolfo Camarillo

When she was a young girl, Isabel Menchaca skipped passed the Camarillo adobe in Ventura. Her bright blue eyes and pretty blue bonnet caught the attention of a boyhood Adolfo Camarillo. He would not forget the charming encounter.

Isabel, like Adolfo, was born in Ventura. She was born in 1861 with a complex family tree of English and Spanish lineage. At age 24, her mother Susan Elwell Lorenzana was widowed with two children. Susan's second marriage to Isabel's father, Francisco Menchaca, was in 1858 when she was 26. The couple had four children together. The children from Susan's first marriage were Isabel's half-siblings. The half-sister, Tranquilina Lorenzana, was the mother of Adolfo's longtime bookkeeper-secretary, Lena Jones.

From the friendly child skipping along the street, Isabel grew into an elegant, popular and beautiful woman. Adolfo and Isabel would visit at chaperoned parties, picnics and dances. Because she was so outgoing and cheerful, Isabel was the center of attention. Her sparkling blue eyes, dark brown hair and smile made her stand out from others. Isabel always had a humorous story to share. Her outgoing and welcoming presence complemented Adolfo's formal and quiet nature. The couple was fashionably attired. She in stylish gowns and dresses. He in well-fitted suits.

After attending a picnic or fiesta, the couple would part. She went back to her parents' home in Ventura. Adolfo made the long ride back to Rancho Calleguas. There he would write letters to his love. "My dearest and most beloved," Adolfo wrote to Isabel. She was more reserved addressing him as "Dear Adolfo." But she quickly acknowledged she was grateful for the letter, though she would have preferred seeing him. His letters were addressed to Miss Isabel Menchaca in San Buenaventura. Hers were sent to Mr. Adolfo Camarillo in Springville. There was no Camarillo postal designation yet.

Finally, Isabel consented to be his wife. They were married on January 10, 1888 at Mission San Buenaventura. Adolfo's brother, Juan and Isabel's sister, Susana, were the attendants. The reception was held at the Menchaca home. Then the couple left on the train to spend their honeymoon in San Francisco at the Palace

Hotel. After he graduated from the International Business College in 1885, Adolfo began keeping a diary. On January 10, 1888 he simply wrote "I was married today." The years after Isabel's death were always noted by Adolfo as what would have been their wedding anniversary. The diaries, trips to San Francisco and the Palace Hotel became a Camarillo family tradition.

The couple commemorated their honeymoon by having their individual formal portraits taken in San Francisco. It would be the beginning of many individual photographs taken of Isabel and Adolfo.

When the couple returned from San Francisco, their life together on Rancho Calleguas began. They moved into the twelve-room adobe that had been the Ruiz home on the rancho. An eight-foot-high heirloom bronze bed, that was a wedding gift to Adolfo's parents from relatives in Spain, was now part of the newlyweds' home. Isabel set about making the adobe their home while Adolfo saw to the 10,000 acres.

With the help of rancho employees, Isabel perfected some traditional cooking techniques and recipes, especially for enchiladas. Even in later years, Isabel would continue to prepare her special dishes and always supervised the seasoning of various items on the family menu. Empanaditas filled with a mixture of fruits grown on the rancho was also a family favorite that she made.

Nine months after their wedding, the couple welcomed the first of their seven children. Their daughter, Minerva, was born on September 21, 1888. She was followed by Rosa who was born on August 30, 1890.

Over the next few years Adolfo had moved the direction of the rancho from cattle to farming resulting in a very successful agricultural business. The couple changed their home life from the Californio adobe to an American style of architecture. In 1892 they built their three-story Victorian Queen Anne mansion.

In that same year they welcomed daughter Eva Susana, who when only three years old, changed her name to Ave Maria which reflected her devotion to the Virgin Mary and the hymn Ave Maria. From then on the family called her Ave or Abby. Her birth was followed by siblings Martina ("Tulita"), Isabella("Nunie"), Frank ("Pancho") and Carmen.

Isabel's new kitchen was separate from the main house. It was across the breezeway, with its outside walls, through a door that led into the kitchen that contained a fireplace. Keeping with the design of the time, there were no built-in cupboards. Cupboards would be added in the 1915 remodel. But the cooking style that Isabel had learned in the old adobe would be part of her modern home. Always looking to the past, but with an eye on the future, Adolfo wanted a wood burning stove. He believed that tortillas taste best cooked on a wood burning stove. There would be modernizations with a gas stove and later electric, but the wood burning stove always remained.

Isabel's tortillas were part of the daily meals. The very best tortillas served, with soft butter and jam, were a special treat for her teas in the parlor. She enjoyed honoring her Spanish and English ancestry. "Mi casa es suya," said Isabel to her guests. "My house is yours." Countless guests visited the grand home. The family kept a guest book in the front parlor and it was signed at their numerous receptions.

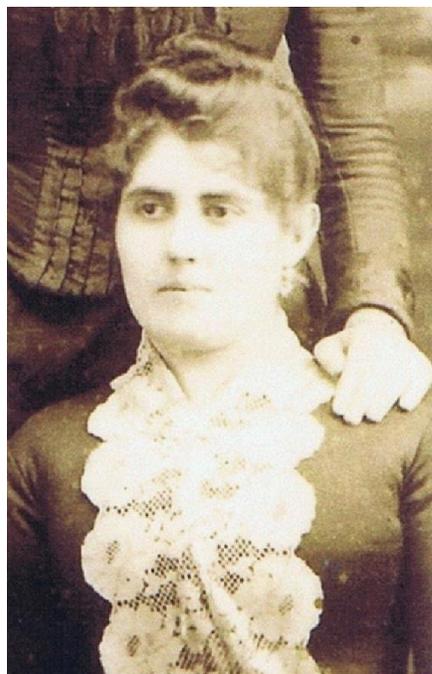
The home was filled with American style furniture, Persian rugs and decorated with mosaics, oils and watercolors. Isabel collected fine silk shawls that she and her daughters wore as evening wraps. The shawls were also used to decorate the front staircase. Isabel made parties and playtime for her children and grandchildren. She had a screened room built onto the house so the children could play and sleep out there in the summer nights. For St. Patrick's Day, Isabel arranged a dance for her older grandchildren and organized green refreshments.

International travels, trips around the country and jaunts to Los Angeles for the theater and shopping were favorite adventures for Isabel, her children and grandchildren. The family's participation in the Ventura County Fair was very important to Adolfo. Isabel and the children were by his side working at fair events. She also accompanied him at the Santa Barbara Fiesta celebrations as well as major public ceremonies in Los Angeles.

Isabel visited Ranch families and set about having the employees' homes improved especially with the addition of indoor plumbing. She was concerned about the nutrition of the Ranch families and would bring servings of fresh meat on her visits.

In July 1936 at age 74, Isabel had taken ill and after six weeks in the hospital, she died. Just a few weeks later, her brother-in-law, Juan, age 69, died in August 1936. In just one month's time, Adolfo had lost his wife and his brother.

The sparkle of Isabel's charm in the Camarillo home dimmed at her passing but it would never be forgotten.



*Tranquilina Lorenzana Jones(left)was the half-sister of Isabel Camarillo. (right)
Isabel's photo courtesy of the Marvel Family*



*Lena Jones, Adolfo's long-time secretary and bookkeeper.
Her mother was Tranquilina Lorenzana Jones. Lena was Isabel's half-niece.*



Isabel Menchaca Camarillo



Back of photo signed and dated Jan. 25, 1888



Back of photo signed and dated



Adolfo Camarillo

Photos courtesy of the Parker Family

State of California. **These Presents are to Authorize** County of Ventura.

and license any Justice of the Supreme Court, Judge of Superior Court, Justice of the Peace, Mayor, Priest or Minister of the Gospel of any denomination, to solemnize within said County, the Marriage of Adolfo Camarillo, native of California, aged 23 years, resident of Ventura County of —, State of California; and Isabella Menchaca, native of California, aged 25 years, resident of Ventura County of Ventura, State of California. Said parties being of sufficient age to be capable of contracting Marriage granted upon the request of Adolfo Camarillo.

In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and affixed the Seal of the Superior Court of said County, this 10th day of January A. D. 1888

County Clerk and ex-officio Clerk of Superior Court in and for said Ventura County.
By Juan A. ... Deputy Clerk.

State of California, County of Ventura, ss.

I Heredy Certify, that I believe the facts stated in the above License to be true, and that upon due inquiry there appears to be no legal impediment to the Marriage of said Adolfo Camarillo and Isabella Menchaca; that said parties were joined in Marriage by me, on the 10th day of January A. D. 1888, in Ventura said County and State; that Juan Camarillo a resident of the said County of Ventura, State of Calif. and Isabella Menchaca a resident of the said County of Ventura were present as witnesses of said ceremony.

In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand, this 10th day of January A. D. 1888

Juan A. ...
Deputy Clerk

Adolfo and Isabel's wedding certificate



*Carmen was born a few years after this photo was taken. Date unknown
Photo courtesy of the Marvel Family*



Isabel with one of her many shawls 1929